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ABSTRACT

In a discussion of the needs of English-as-a-Second-Language learners, it is suggested that the best approach to identifying needs is at the local level. Specific suggestions are made for classroom teachers, drawing on research techniques in second language learning and English for special purposes. Teachers are told to: (1) expect some mismatch between the outcome of system-level and local level needs assessments; (2) gather information on the real situations in which the students will need the language, should the teacher have to depart from the syllabus based on system-wide needs assessment; and (3) be aware of possible inaccuracies in textbook information about situation-specific language use. Suggestions are also made for administrators wishing to encourage their faculty in the local approach, including: (1) helping to ensure the quality of the system-wide needs assessment process; (2) recognizing that in spite of system-wide assessment quality, there will always be some mismatch with the needs of any specific classroom; and (3) supporting the classroom teacher in making local assessments. Anecdotal information is used to illustrate these points. (MSE)

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Teacher-executed needs assessment: Some suggestions for teachers and program administrators*

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In this paper, it is suggested that the best approach to identifying the needs of ESL learners is at the local level: a local approach for identifying local needs. Specific suggestions are made for classroom teachers, drawing upon research techniques in second language acquisition and English for special purposes, and examples are provided. A list of suggestions for program administrators who wish to encourage their faculty to use this approach is also included.

In designing a syllabus for any ESL class, the teacher needs to determine at the very least two basic things: (a) what the learners know (and do not know) already, and (b) what they need to learn (that is, what language is used in the specific contexts in which they will need to function). Language proficiency tests will measure what the learners of the language know already, and the classroom teacher will continue to assess her students' knowledge informally on a day-to-day basis. But this paper will discuss the sort of needs analysis which focuses upon the second area: what the students need to learn. In this paper I will make two assumptions, both of which are relatively uncontroversial. First, I assume that English language forms and functions vary in relation to different social contexts in which they are used. All aspects of the social setting have an influence upon language use: the identity of the interlocutors (level of education, gender, role, degree of familiarity, etc.), the interlocutors' purpose in the

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* This paper was presented at the national conference of the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors, in Minneapolis, Minnesota in May 1989. The approach which I describe here was developed in collaboration with Dr. George Yule (now at Louisiana State University), and is described in more detail in our book, *Focus on the Language Learner*. In that book, we advocate a local approach to local needs -- that is, needs assessment done by the classroom teacher, focusing upon the needs of each unique language class. We feel that such needs assessment is central to the operation of any successful ESL class, and that such teacher-executed needs assessments need not be *ad hoc* or uninteresting, but rather can proceed in a principled manner, drawing heavily upon tools used by researchers in related areas.

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exchange (to sell products, make friends, obtain medical aid), the physical location (university classroom, factory, restaurant), the discipline (medicine, engineering, the arts, automotive mechanics, food science). Not only will vocabulary vary in relation to these different social contexts, but so also will the degree of use of grammatical forms and the functions which those forms mark. To learn to function in a given social context is at least in part to learn the language of that social context. A second assumption I make is that no learner will need to use English in all possible social contexts of American society--any more than any group of native speakers of English will. As we move into new social contexts, we need to master the language which is appropriate to that context. This is true for native and non-native speakers alike. It is possible, given the goals and objectives of any individual, to identify those contexts in which that person is most likely to operate. For a university student, for example, one can identify typical university contexts: the registration line, the dorm room, the cafeteria, the classroom (and more specifically, the introduction to physics class, the calculus class) and so on.

Given, then, that as ESL educators we must select certain language forms and functions to be taught in a certain order (since in the interest of time and money we cannot teach everything), and given that we can select those forms and functions at least in part in relation to those social contexts in which the learners will be functioning, we come down to the bottom line, the very basic question: Who is going to do all this needs analysis? And how much work will be involved?

My answer is that, while many people may participate in this process, in the end this needs analysis will be done by the classroom teacher, at the local level of each individual class. System-wide needs analysis--by the administrator, textbook writer, professional curriculum developer--does of course have a role to play in setting the broad parameters. In general terms, it is possible to identify the goals of the average student population and to set course goals accordingly--in general terms. One would not expect the average university student, for example, to need to know the English language forms and functions typical of the welfare office, the racetrack--or the halls of the U.S. Senate, for that matter. General parameters can be set at the system-wide level. *But* we must remember that it is always the classroom teacher who implements any curriculum, in light of her perception of *local* student needs--that is, the needs of *this* unique group of learners. And no two classes of learners are exactly alike. It is this mismatch between the general, system-wide needs analysis of the specialists and the very specific, essentially local needs analysis of the classroom teacher which always sends good ESL teachers to the copy room, adapting and changing textbook chapters, developing handouts, and so on.

I can give a very specific, if somewhat extreme, example of this dynamic based on a paper written a few years back by one of the (then) grad-

uate students in our program at the University of Minnesota, Karen Sorensen (1982). Sorensen was an ESL teacher at the University, assigned to teach an English class to science students. While this course previoualy had always consisted of a variety of science majors, this quarter it was made up almost exclusively of agriculture students. The textbook which had been chosen (at a system level) for the course had always been appropriate before--but this time it was not. Three weeks into the course, Sorensen was told by her students that the book was not helping them with their classes; in their classes, the students said, they were having a great deal of difficulty with writing assignments. The assigned book *did* contain exercises on writing--but primarily sentence-level grammar exercises; the most extensive writing required was the description of a few simple experiments. The students said the book did not help them with their coursework. Sorensen--having a general liberal arts background--had no idea what language skills and writing abilities were needed in the students' agriculture classes at the University.

Now, what is a teacher to do in such a situation? One possibility might have been to ignore the students and plow on with the textbook. This is not a good choice, however. The students had expressed their discontent with the textbook and their motivation could be predicted to drop with any attempt to continue using it. Another possibility might have been to just patch in some more complex writing assignments from a higher-level class ("Want more writing? OK, here's more writing"). But this would surely have been a chewing gum and baling wire approach, possibly useful to *appease* the students, but quite unlikely to meet their real writing needs in their agriculture classes. What Sorensen did is what any good ESL teacher would do: she conducted a global needs analysis on the spot, and went to the duplicating room to adapt her syllabus.

Sorensen began by re-examining the set of questionnaires she had routinely collected from her students on the first day of class. She discovered that most of her students were enrolled in one or more of five classes, each representing a core requirement in the College of Agriculture. She obtained a copy of the syllabus from each of these classes, and spoke with each instructor about the writing requirements for the class. She found that all the writing requirements shared in common the solution of a 'problem.' She also found that international students typically had difficulty with writing assignments involving the analysis of a problem and the proposal of an appropriate solution. Finally, when she examined some corrected pieces of student writing from these courses, she found that the instructors' comments almost never related to grammatical correctness; rather, they focused upon the writer's effectiveness in communicating information. Sorensen concluded that her students' writing problems related not to difficulties with grammatical correctness, but to their inability to set forth a logical argument in 'problem-solution' type papers--specifically, their failure to

express the relationship between facts and to form accurate generalizations in English. It was then, of course, clear why the ESL textbook was not helpful; it focused only upon sentence-level grammatically and not upon the ability to present clear argumentation in support of a conclusion. Sorensen developed some writing activities which provided practice in selecting and organizing data, posing problems and drawing conclusions--thereby moving her syllabus closer to meeting her specific students' real needs.

Of course, Sorensen's example is extreme. Most of the time, a teacher finds that the course goals and materials are more appropriate to a given class's needs than this. Usually, the teacher is mostly fine-tuning the needs assessment. But Sorensen's example does illustrate at least two basic points. First, teachers are always conducting needs analysis at the local level; they must do this in order to decide what to teach next. Second, a teacher-executed needs analysis does not need to be *ad hoc* or sloppy. The fact that it is essentially local, useful only for one group of students, and not necessarily generalizable to a wider population, does not mean that this needs analysis is either sloppy or even uninteresting to other practitioners--quite the contrary. I would argue for the essential centrality of local needs analysis by trained ESL teachers. Here I will offer one or two guidelines and tools, gleaned from the research literature, which may be usable at the local classroom level by the teacher, and I will make some suggestions as to what program administrators might do to facilitate this sort of local-level needs assessment.

Some guidelines for teachers seem clear from the Sorensen example. First, we should always expect there to be *some* mismatch between the outcome of a system-level needs assessment and a local-level needs assessment; we expect this because there is always a difference between the 'normal' class and the actual class. An alert teacher will expect such a mismatch and plan to deal with it from the beginning. Minimally, a teacher ought to begin every class by obtaining information on the makeup of each different group of students: their learning backgrounds, goals and objectives. A questionnaire like the one Sorensen used is a good examle of how this could be done.

Second, if it becomes necessary for the teacher to depart substantially from the syllabus which was based on a system-wide needs assessment, it will be very important to gather real-world information in the actual situations in which these particular students will be using the language. It is too easy for language teachers, relying only on their intuitions as native speakers of English, to make false assumptions. For example, it is easy to assume that grammatical correctness is essential to student success in writing course papers at the University. It is also easy for any native speaker, using the armchair approach, to miss things--as, in this situation, the fact that the rhetorical organization of problem-solution writing is important and may be problematic for non-native speakers. The only way to

overcome these difficulties is to get out of the ESL classroom and obtain real-world information from the situations in which these particular language learners are, or will be, functioning.

A third, and related, point to remember here is that the textbook which is being used in the class may be presenting inaccurate information about the language which is used in the situations where these students are headed. This will be so for two reasons: first, most textbooks present information about "general English," not the specialized English used, say, for writing lab reports in graduate-level chemistry classes; and, second, the authors of most textbooks do not themselves gather real-life information on language use by native speakers, relying instead on their own armchair intuitions. And those intuitions are often wrong. We know this is so on the basis of at least two studies. The first was done at the University of Minnesota by Amy Burkhalter, a graduate student in ESL at the time. Burkhalter (1986) was teaching oral discussion skills in an advanced level ESL speaking class; she found five textbooks that presented the language which ought to be used in oral discussions. *But* these five texts taught very different sets of functions for use in discussion. Even where the functions taught were the same, the books did not agree on the linguistic forms which should be used to realize those functions. For example, four of the books said that 'expressing an opinion' was a function used in oral discussion, but those books did not agree as to what language ought to be used in English to 'express an opinion.' Fifty-six different phrases were taught as appropriate to this function, but of these only *five* were taught by more than one author, and only *one* was taught by all four. All of these authors seemed to be relying on their own intuitions in presenting this information. Burkhalter decided to gather some data observing a discussion among native speakers of English who were students at the University and noting what expressions *they* used to 'express an opinion'. Of the fifty-six expressions which the ESL authors had suggested for use in 'expressing an opinion,' only *three* were actually used by these native speakers--and *one* of these was used almost to the exclusion of the others. These textbook authors, by relying on their own intuitions instead of basing their recommendations on observations of actual language use by native speakers, were presenting students with inaccurate information and in some sense creating extra and unnecessary work for them.

Burkhalter is not alone in noticing this inaccuracy in textbook presentations. Williams (1988) observed the language actually used by fluent speakers of English in business meetings in Hong Kong and compared it to the language taught in EFL textbooks in Hong Kong. Of the seventeen functions taught in the EFL textbooks as appropriate for business meetings, only ten actually occurred in real meetings. And, out of the 135 different linguistic expressions presented in the EFL books to realize the functions pre-

sented, only seven were actually used in the business meetings in three hours of talk.

These findings suggest that ESL teachers should not rely on their textbooks for information about the frequency with which language forms are used in the real world, or about the usefulness of those forms in particular target situations. If target situations can be identified which are relevant to a particular group of students, then some real-world data ought to be gathered from those situations.

To reinforce these second and third points, I would like to describe another case in which real-world data from the target situation might be useful. Imagine a situation in which an ESL teacher is working with a group of adult refugee students living in St. Paul. She has been assigned a textbook organized along the lines of a situational syllabus: each chapter deals with a different situation in which these learners might need to use English--the grocery store, the post office, the bank, and so on. In order to decide which chapters she needs to cover and in what order, she tries to determine the situations in which her particular students need to function. Almost all of her students say that they need to visit the welfare office frequently, and that they have difficulty communicating in that context. Now there is a problem: the textbook does not cover that situation, and the teacher has never set foot in a welfare office. The teacher can do one of at least three things: ignore her needs analysis, and just teach what is in the book. Or, she can use the armchair approach, and try to imagine what sort of language might be used in welfare offices. Or, she can try to obtain some direct information on language use in the local welfare office. Using this third approach would provide helpful information for the ESL teacher to use in planning a syllabus--and would also provide real-world, relevant language data for the class to analyze in any learner-centered, problem-oriented classroom approach, such as that proposed by Shirley Brice-Heath (1986).

"But," asks an overburdened ESL teacher, "who has time for this sort of data-gathering? I barely have time to teach what's in the book, without having to, in essence, write my own textbook, going off-campus to gather language data." As both a teacher and a researcher, I acknowledge the difficulties involved. In response to this overburdened teacher, I would say: "You do not have to write a new textbook." There is a whole continuum of actions that can be taken, ranging from the minimally time-consuming to the most time-consuming, but all of them actions which will provide helpful and accurate information on language use by native speakers in the situations into which the students are moving .

Think back and consider the teacher I just described--the one who needed information about language use in the welfare office. There are a variety of things she can do, some more time-consuming than others.

1. She has already used the least time-consuming tactic: developing and distributing a language use questionnaire on the first day of class.

Her purpose was to determine learner aims and to identify those situations in which her students needed to use the language.

Ideally, her questionnaire would also ask for information about language-related activities which take place in those target situations. Armed with this information alone, the teacher could identify areas where her textbook does not meet the needs of her students.

2. Her second step now might be to organize a student-executed needs assessment, as proposed by Hanges (1982), and which I will describe in more detail below. Minimally, she can ask her students for more information on language use in the welfare office (the target situation), for details on the communication problems they have had there, and for copies of written materials they have to read and/or fill out. Written materials can be used for classroom exercises. Discussion of communication problems may enable the teacher to identify language functions and forms which learners need work on.

3. If she has more time, she may be able to make direct contact (possibly by phone or mail) with someone who works in the welfare office, asking about communication problems which have arisen with refugee clients.

4. She might ask a willing student to tape-record his or her own interactions in the welfare office; this tape, or parts of it, could profitably be used, with the student's permission, for later class discussion. The students might be asked to discuss the following: What questions does the native speaker on this tape ask? What language forms are used? What is the speaker's intention in asking this question? What are possible ways the learner might have answered? What would be the implications of answering one way as opposed to another? In this kind of discussion, the student who taped the interaction becomes the "expert" on what happened and what might have happened, and the teacher becomes a supporting resource on language use. (See Brice-Heath 1986 for more on this sort of learner-centered problem-oriented classroom approach.)

5. The most time-consuming thing (but possibly the most rewarding) the teacher could do would be to actually go to the welfare office with one of the students and observe the sorts of interactions which take place and the difficulties which arise. But, as we all know, few teachers have the time to do this. (Program administrators, on the other hand, might find it useful to free one or two teachers for a period every year to do this sort of on-site needs assessment in situations which have been identified as central targets for large numbers of students over the years.)

The best alternative for data-gathering (for the language teacher with no time to spare) is the learner-executed needs assessment, proposed by Hanges (1982). Hanges argues that there are sound educational and philosophical reasons (propounded by people like Freire, 1970, and Jenks, 1981) for having the students tell the teacher what they need to learn in

their own target situations. Hanges argues that learners themselves can, with guidance, provide the teacher with valuable information about those precise situations in which they need (or will need) to use the language. She developed a student assignment (reproduced in Tarone and Yule, 1989) which sent her university-bound students out into their respective departments to gather information on language use within a common framework which they had all previously worked out together. The students then reported the results of their research to their teacher and to one another. In this case, the data represented information on the kinds of writing assigned in required courses in their fields, the amount of each kind of writing required, and examples of writing assignments from different courses. Such learner-executed needs assessments have a number of advantages for the ESL teacher: they save the teacher a tremendous amount of time, they permit the learners to become the 'experts' on their own language needs (thereby improving learner motivation in the ESL classroom), they provide the teacher with data which might otherwise be hard to get (for example, quizzes and corrected pieces of student writing), and they allow for insights the teacher might not have planned on--as, for example, that agriculture teachers do not mark student essays down for grammatical inaccuracy. There are, of course, also disadvantages to the student-executed needs assessment. There is the possibility that students may not be accurate or thorough in their reports. While this disadvantage may be most serious in the short run, it seems to me that it can be remedied in the long run; as the teacher gathers information from more and more students on the language used in Department A, she will be increasingly able to weed out the inaccuracies and fill in the gaps. The program administrator may have a role to play here, too, in creating and maintaining a system for filing information of this sort.

This, of course, brings me to a final consideration. What can the program administrator do in a situation where the classroom teacher is the key to local-level needs assessment? I have a number of suggestions.

First, the system-level needs assessment is still needed in order to set the general parameters for the individual classes. The 'normal' student should be identified, and the needs of that 'normal' student identified as well. The better this system-level needs assessment is done, the less work there will be at the local level for the classroom teacher.

Second, the administrator should recognize that, no matter how well the system-level needs assessment is done, there will always, NECESSARILY, still be a mismatch with the needs of any particular class--a mismatch which the classroom teacher will need to identify and move to handle. After all, the norm is only the norm--each group of students is unique, and the classroom teacher has the task of identifying the precise needs of each unique group of learners. The administrator should not therefore insist that classroom teachers adhere unquestioningly to pro-

gram-wide goals and objectives defined on the basis of a system-wide needs assessment.

Third, the administrator can support the classroom teacher in her attempts to conduct local-level needs assessment in a variety of ways. I have already hinted at some of these ways.

(a) The administrator can make it a matter of program policy that classroom teachers should administer a language needs questionnaire at the beginning of each class. A model of such a questionnaire could be provided to all language teachers. Results of questionnaires from previous classes could be saved and tabulated for the information of the classroom teacher.

(b) The program administrator could free one or two teachers every year to spend a few weeks going out into some of those situations identified as targets by large numbers of program students in order to obtain first-hand data on language use in those situations. Tapes of authentic interactions between native speakers in those situations, authentic written materials gleaned from those situations--all would be useful, both for the teacher's use in developing a syllabus and for classroom use in a learner-centered problem-oriented approach.

(c) The program administrator could arrange for the establishment and maintenance of a file of information on language use in target situations: tapes and transcriptions of tapes with marginal comments by the participants who were involved, authentic written materials, interviews with native speakers in those situations, course syllabi, and so on.

(d) The program administrator could arrange for the establishment and maintenance of a file of teaching materials, organized in terms of language function and forms used to realize those functions, and cross-classified in terms of situations in which those functions have been identified as useful. Since the outcome of local-level needs assessment usually involves the adaptation of the textbook by the classroom teacher, such a file of teaching materials would be very helpful indeed.

To summarize, in this paper I have (drawing heavily upon Tarone and Yule, 1989) argued that local-level needs assessment, executed and organized by the classroom teacher, is central to successful instruction in the ESL classroom. I have outlined some guidelines which the classroom teacher ought to follow in conducting a local-level needs assessment, and suggested a continuum of data-gathering techniques which might be used, ranged from least time-consuming to most time-consuming. Finally, I have suggested some concrete actions which program administrators might take to facilitate the work of classroom teachers in conducting local-level needs assessments.

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